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ABSTRACT

Although whole language teachers say they no longer consider readability evaluation (in the sense of measuring word and sentence length) in the selection of literature for their classrooms, they do have criteria for matching the readers or prospective readers in their classroom to literary materials. Teachers in whole language classrooms see the following factors as being important to the readability of the literature which they select: (1) print size; (2) illustrations; (3) repetition; (4) vocabulary; (5) predictability; and (6) interest. Nonfiction reading materials can also be evaluated for typographic clues (bold type or italics), presence of graphs and charts, and a variety of other aids to comprehension and clarity. (RS)

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Selecting Literature for the Whole Language Classroom

What Factors Should We Consider?

Readability Special Interest Group

Convention of the International Reading Association

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Seminar: Selecting Materials for the Whole Language Classroom

Overview: What Factors Should We Consider?

I've given a lot of thought to the question of where readability evaluation belongs in the whole language classroom and whether, in fact, the concept belongs there at all. Several times when I've mentioned the word readability in connection with the selection of literature or trade books for their students, teachers have smiled and informed me that readability evaluation was no longer considered in the planning of this aspect of the school reading program. On the surface, at least, there appeared to be a dichotomy between the selection of the fiction and the content materials used in the whole language classroom.

Serious discussion with several teachers, however, revealed a significant pattern of responses. Teachers did have criteria for matching the readers or prospective readers in their classroom to literary materials. And after all, that's what readability is all about - matching the reader to his or her reading materials. The factors, or variables, may differ slightly from the measurement of word length and sentence length using some chart or formula, a procedure narrowly considered by some to be the be-all and end- all of readability evaluation, but many of us realize that there is more to readability evaluation than the use of one instrument or criterion. We in the Readability Special Interest Group have always tried to provide a platform for researchers with alternative means to the successful matching of the reader and the text in whatever environment.

Teachers in the whole language classroom seem to see several

factors as being important to the readability of the literature which they select. These include the following:

Print size - the lower the grade, the larger, with the big books being the most important at the kindergarten and first grade levels.

Illustrations - attractive, relevant pictures aid greatly in telling the story. Harris and Sipay in the latest edition of How to Increase Reading Ability (1990) tell us that illustrations can facilitate reading comprehension by repeating information occurring in the text, by providing information that clarifies or expands on the textual material, or by holding the reader's interest.

Repetition - if students are to learn to read from their materials they must be exposed to the same semantic and syntactic structures, words and sentence patterns, over and over. Again, this is especially true at the lower levels.

Vocabulary - this goes hand in hand with repetition in the determination of the suitability of reading materials.

Predictability - This actually goes with concept level. The concept level of the plot or story line must be such that the students will have sufficient prior knowledge or schemata to understand the story and engage in making logical predictions about the outcome.

Interest - Everyone knows that nothing can enhance the readability of a piece of reading material like heightened interest in the story or the characters. This is especially true when a favorite series or character is involved.

Coincidentally, Richard Bamberger, working with Erich Vanecek in the early 1980's (Bamberger and Rabin, 1984; Bamberger and Vanecek, 1984) on a comprehensive procedure for evaluating German language literature in Austria developed in addition to a formula, a check list for the evaluation of five nonlanguage subjective variables in a piece of reading material. These included content, organization, print, style, and motivation. Grade levels could be computed for these factors and compared with those obtained from the formulas. In approximately

70% of the cases, the grade levels arrived at through the use of formulas were similar to those arrived at through the use of the checklist. This checklist could well be used with the literature selected for the whole language classroom.

There is obviously overlap between the evaluation of fiction and nonfiction content materials. In addition to the more familiar factors, content materials should be evaluated for such typographic clues as bold type and italics for headings or new vocabulary, for the presence of graphic materials such as graphs and charts, and a variety of other aids to comprehension and clarity. Even with textual materials for your content subjects, true readability evaluation is multi-faceted and goes well beyond the formulas.

But let's not either omit or fault these formulas. They are still the fastest way to evaluate a piece of written text. And just as in other areas, researchers continue to look for better, more flexible instruments. One example is the Lexile Scale (D. Smith, Stenner, Horabin, M. Smith, 1989), an alternative method of evaluating the syntactic and semantic components of prose.

So, let's listen to our presenters and find out what help they can give us in selecting literature, and all reading materials, for the whole language classroom.

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